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ABSTRACT

An examination of the applicability of self-assessment as a tool for student placement in foreign language instruction focused on: (1) the ability of first-year university students to assess their performance level in the second language through a self-assessment questionnaire; (2) the quality of the questionnaire itself and its potential for improvement; and (3) the real effects of using a self-assessment questionnaire for student placement. The subjects were 200 students of French as a second language and 200 students of English as a second language, all randomly selected. For the first issue, a questionnaire developed for this purpose and covering the four language skill areas was administered with a proficiency test for comparison. It was found that students could assess themselves but that the instrument needed improvement. A test of the questionnaire itself revealed that more consideration of the specific language use situation would improve the instrument. For the third phase of the study, the results of only the self-assessment questionnaire were used to place students, and the rates of change from initial placement were compared with the rates of change from placement made in the previous year using the proficiency test. A lower rate of transfer was found with the use of the self-assessment instrument for placement. The instrument is found to be useful in certain situations, although some further revisions are recommended. (MSE)

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Self-Assessment as a Placement Test [1]

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Although self-assessment has been used for a long time now in areas as diversified as psychology, sociology, business, etc., it has not yet really found its way into the fields of second language teaching and testing. The technique seems simple enough to the casual observer but even though a few articles have been written on the subject during the last ten years, many questions remain. The obvious one concerns the ability of the students to evaluate with a reliable degree of precision their own level of performance on a given task. But even when this has been answered satisfactorily, doubts still persist as to the applicability of self-assessment to classroom situations (as opposed to research lab conditions) and to the use that can really be made of the results such a technique could yield. In this paper we would like to address these questions by first touching briefly on the principles underlying self-assessment and then describing a three-part four year research project that has lead to its use as the sole means for second language student placement in the various English and French courses at the Centre for Second Language Learning of the University of Ottawa.

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(1) Revised version of a paper presented at TESOL '85, New York City

The Concept of Self-Assessment

It has become somewhat trite to state that evaluation is an integral part of the learning process and that it should reflect closely not only the objectives of a given program but also the approach being used to teach it. There seems however to be quite a gap between words and deeds if one looks, for instance, at the types of evaluation that are being used in the so-called communicative approach where discrete point and multiple choice items are still the rule, not the exception. The recent shift in emphasis from teacher-centered towards student-centered pedagogy has brought about questions as to the evaluation processes that would be best suited for this relatively new approach. It is obvious that in a student-centered setting the student may become responsible for many of the decisions concerning what and how he wants to learn. The teaching/learning of languages for specific purposes, the use of a functional approach and even more that of a communicative approach require that the student be a part of the complete learning cycle. It is unacceptable that his role be restricted to that of a learner of content chosen by others for him through techniques imposed by others upon him and for purposes established by others for him. But, as Fellenz (1976) points out: "Self-directed learners are not produced simply by telling adult students that they are to be responsible for their own learning...". They need help in reaching a stage where they will be sufficiently autonomous to proceed on their own. At the same time, this new found autonomy carries with it the responsibility of making the decisions as to when sufficient learning has occurred, given

the initial (or revised) objectives. In other words, the students have to be able to assess their own progress.

The ability to evaluate one's own performance is of paramount importance in life since it is the only way one has of finding out how to adjust to the environment, to make proper decisions and choices, etc. But while this capacity may be socially acquired during the growing up and maturing process, thus making a person more or less able to cope with real life situations, it does not necessarily follow that self-assessment know-how is directly transferred from social life to classroom learning situations. On the other hand, it seems obvious that some form of self-assessment is occurring when a student coming to the end of a language course says things like: "I think I understand the newscasts better" or "I don't have so many problems with prepositions anymore". The question thus becomes whether such judgements have some foundations in reality or are mere unsubstantiated feelings.

There are two important aspects to consider when asking questions of that nature about self-assessment. First, when an adult student puts himself in a learning situation he knows why he is doing it and he has a good idea of where he wants to go, of what he is expecting from the course. It is quite possible that his expectations and his needs will not coincide, that they will have to be revised during the course but it is most important that the opportunity to evaluate his situation vis-à-vis his objectives exists.

The other point is that before being a learner of a second language, the adult already knows a language and he therefore knows in a

more or less explicit way how and why he uses his own language. This is why it is important that he, the learner, be the one to evaluate his situation as stated above for he is the only one who has the knowledge, be it intuitively, of the relationship between the objectives of the self-imposed task and his actual knowledge at any given point in time (Huart 1978).

Painchaud and LeBlanc (1984) have referred to some recent research on self-teaching and on self-directed learning (Serre 1978; Tough 1979; Tremblay 1983) that throws an interesting light on self-assessment. When a learning situation does not include an appointed evaluator, different in that from the normal classroom set-up, the learner uses various means to evaluate his learning: peers' or experts' judgements, use of grids where available, trials in real-life situations, etc. It is as if the learner were collecting information that he will have to analyse before deciding whether his learning has been successful or not given his previously established objectives. Since he takes the trouble to collect all this data, it seems highly probable that the learner will be influenced by his findings provided his interpretation of the situation is accurate. The above research does not concern language however and the question remains largely unanswered for this very complex activity.

As far back as ten years ago, Upshur (1975) was suggesting that students were able to give a pretty accurate assessment of their ability with the language. But as indicated by Fellenz (*op. cit.*), "While a number of adult educators have pointed out to self-evaluation of the learner as vital, few have offered any definite or practical suggestions for the implementation of a self-evaluation approach." Van Passel (1974),

Oskarsson (1978) and others used self-assessment questionnaires to allow their students to pass judgement on their own knowledge and it became obvious that this would be the most efficient way of getting satisfactory results. This comes from the fact that in preparing a questionnaire, all those taking part in the learning/teaching process must get involved in order to clearly establish the relationship between the objectives of either the institution and/or the learner and the content of the self-assessment questionnaire. So when we got involved in the project that was to lead to placement by self-assessment, it seemed obvious that this was the route to follow.

Research Questions

There were a number of questions that had to be answered satisfactorily in our mind before the change refered to above could be attempted. The first one concerned the very ability of first year university students to assess their level of performance in the second language through a self-assessment questionnaire. Then there was that of the quality of the questionnaire itself and of how (and whether) it could be improved. Finally we had to find out what the real effects of using a self-assessment questionnaire for student placement would be. These questions were the basis for the three parts of the research that will now be described.

FIRST STAGE OF THE PROJECT (1981)

The question underlying the first part of the research was that of the ability of the students to assess their level of proficiency in their

second language. In order to collect the needed data, we randomly selected 200 students of French as a second language and 200 students of English as a second language as they came on registration day to write the compulsory *Proficiency Test* of the Centre for Second Language Learning in either French or English. These tests are standardized three-part tests that include a section on listening, one on reading and a cloze. They are used to establish the proficiency level of the new students entering the University of Ottawa for certification purposes.

At the beginning of the test session, the chosen students were asked to first fill out a four part *Self-Assessment Questionnaire* dealing with each of the four skills. They then took the *Proficiency Test*. The items used in the questionnaire were graded for each skill and had the following form, for instance in "listening":

> I understand information containing figures (course codes, time-table, adresses, phone numbers, prices, etc.)
> I understand the usual terms of my field of specialization or interest
> I understand a normal conversation even when my presence is not taken into account

For each of these statements, the participants were asked to give themselves a mark on a scale of 1 to 5, a 1 score meaning "I cannot do that at all" and a 5 score "I can do that all the time". Since there were 40 items, the total low score was 40 while the total high score was 200. The total scores on the *Self-Assessment Questionnaire* were then correlated with the total scores on the Proficiency Test. Correlations were also established between each of the three sub-tests of the *Proficiency Test* and the four parts of the *Self-Assessment Questionnaire*. The results for both the correlations between total scores and correlations between

sub-tests are presented in Table1 and Table 2.

TABLE 1

Correlations Between Total Test Score and Self-Assessment

	Test Total
Self-Assessment, Listening	.43
Self-Assessment, Reading	.53
Self-Assessment, Speaking	.39
Self-Assessment, Writing	.50
Self-Assessment, Total	.53

All results are significant at the .05 level

TABLE 2

Correlation Matrix by Sub-Test

	T L	T R	T C	S-A L	S-A R	S-A S	S-A W
Test, Listening	1.0						
Test, Reading	.63	1.0					
Test, Cloze	.57	.85	1.0				
S.-Assess. Listening	.52	.37	.38	1.0			
S.-Assess. Reading	.47	.49	.49	.75	1.0		
S.-Assess. Speaking	.50	.41	.38	.75	.70	1.0	
S.-Assess. Writing	.42	.47	.50	.63	.72	.72	1.0

Legend: T L= Test, Listening; T R= Test, Reading; etc.
All correlations whose absolute values are >.34 are simultaneously significant at the .05 level

A total correlation score of .53 was in line with the .50 cor-

relation found by Oskarsson (1978) and showed that the students could indeed assess to some extent their own knowledge of the language. It was felt however that if some improvement could be made of the instrument, the results could be better. It was then decided to make a second experiment with particular attention being paid to the form of the questionnaire and its relation with the stated objectives of the language program.

SECOND STAGE OF THE PROJECT (1983)

There were two main questions underlying the second part of the research: 1) Does the manner in which the statements are constructed regarding an identical task have an effect on the results? 2) Can the results be improved by providing the students with instruments more closely related to their situation as potential second language users? To try finding answers to these questions, it was first decided that the same general procedure would be followed, that of obtaining and correlating two sets of results, that of the *Self-Assessment Questionnaire* and that of the *Proficiency Test*. It was also decided to bring the *Self-Assessment Questionnaire* more in line with the second language requirements of the institution by limiting it to the receptive skills.

The instrument was made up of blocks of items consisting in one general statement followed by five graded situations referring to the statement. For instance, in reading:

I could understand the following texts in my field of specialization if they were written in French:

1. a course description
2. the instructions concerning the work to be done in a course
3. the table of content of a textbook
4. an annotated bibliography
5. exam questions

Once again, the students were asked to give themselves a score between 1 and 5 for each number. The listening part was made up of six blocks (30 questions) and the reading part of four blocks (20 questions). The low and high scores were thus 50 and 250.

In order to assess the possible effects of the format of the questionnaire, it was decided that two questionnaires would be used. The first one, Questionnaire A, was built with a communicative description of the language in mind using as reference Munby's *Communicative Syllabus Design* (1978). A block in listening would therefore look like this:

I can understand the implicit meaning of a spoken message when the speaker

1. indicates his disagreement by using turns such as "I agree, but..."
2. suggests a cause and effect relationship without using words such as "consequently, therefore, etc."
3. seems to be asking a question but is really giving a polite order ("Could you call Mary? Is the window open?")
4. uses figures of speech such as metaphors ("A storm of protest", etc.)
5. says one thing but where the situation is changing the meaning of what is being said ("What a lovely day" when it is raining hard)

The questionnaire made on that model aimed at establishing the possible effects of the use of metalinguistic language on the ability to assess one's own level of proficiency in the language.

As for Questionnaire B, it was built from situations a student was likely to encounter in his university life. An example in listening:

I could understand the following information given orally in French by a member of personnel or by another student:

1. how to locate books or documents at the library or the bookstore
2. how to find my way around campus
3. how a course is organized and what work is required
4. how to operate audio-visual equipment (language lab, movie projector,...)
5. how to register

Both questionnaires were distributed randomly as the students entered the test room and, as in the first experiment, they were asked to fill out the

Self-Assessment Questionnaire first and they were then asked to take the *Proficiency Test*. It was also decided to increase considerably the size of the experiment and the number of students thus tested was as follows for each of the forms of the questionnaire:

Questionnaire A, French as L2	N= 861
Questionnaire B, French as L2	N= 678
Questionnaire A, English as L2	N= 662
Questionnaire B, English as L2	N= 660

The results of the analysis of all the scores were similiar for both French and English as L2 so only the results for French will be shown here in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3

Correlations Between the Proficiency Test Results and the Self-Assessment Questionnaire (Questionnaire A)

	Test Listening	Test Reading	Test Cloze	Test Total
Self-Assess., Listening	0.78	0.69	0.71	0.79
Self-Assess., Reading	0.74	0.70	0.72	0.78
Self-Assess., Total	0.78	0.71	0.73	0.80

The results are significant at the 0.0001 level

As can be seen from these results, the answer to the question regarding the possible improvement of the correlations that might follow the use of an instrument taking into serious consideration the actual situation of the students in relation to their language use was an emphatic yes. The

correlations climbed to the level of 0.80 and of 0.82 respectively. On the other hand, where it had been felt that the way an item was written might

Table 4

Correlations Between the Proficiency Test Results and the Self-Assessment Questionnaire (Questionnaire B)

	Test Listening	Test Reading	Test Cloze	Test Total
Self-Assess., Listening	0.81	0.69	0.73	0.80
Self-Assess., Reading	0.76	0.70	0.73	0.79
Self-Assess., Total	0.80	0.71	0.74	0.82

These results are significant at the 0.0001 level

have some bearing on the results, the correlations did not show any significant differences neither for French nor for English. This result led to the conclusion that form is not an important factor in the writing of items provided the students have the background to understand what is actually expected from them.

The combined results of the 1981 and the 1983 research showing that self-assessment could be counted on as a reliable tool in the fields of second language teaching and testing, the stage was set for the use of a self-assessment questionnaire as the sole means for placing students in second language groups.

THIRD STAGE OF THE PROJECT (1983-84)

The first step of that research was to involve the language teachers in the establishment of a description of the various levels of proficiency, the aim, for institutional purposes, being descriptions for six

different terminal levels starting with true beginners. The language teachers were thus asked to write descriptors that they felt were representative of each of the six levels in both listening and reading. A descriptor could take the form of "Can understand a phone number" (level 2), of "Can distinguish between preterit and present perfect" (level 3) or any other form. The exercise produced well over one thousand descriptors and showed that the concept of level could vary considerably from one teacher to the other. It was possible however, by using the descriptors proposed most often, to establish a rough picture of what each level should be like.

From this rough sketch, a group of specialists worked out a matrix that could be used as the basis for the descriptions of all levels. The matrix took into consideration such components as the types of texts, the genres, the registers, the length, the norm, and the types of presentation (speed, repetitions,etc.) on the one hand in relation with a number of operations such as the development of specific abilities, retention, critical listening at the identification level (who is speaking, in what tone, etc.) and critical listening at the evaluation level (draw conclusions, decide what to do, etc.).

This complex exercise produced descriptive components that made up the various levels and supplied the self-assessment questionnaire developer with the technical material needed to construct items that could actually be used by the students. For instance, where the matrix showed that a student at level two was expected to be able to understand, in a dialogue of the social conversation genre between two students at the familiar register and spoken at regular speed, the topic of the conversa-

tion with one or two details, it is obvious that this wording could not be used for the students with any chance of success. And so, part of the questionnaire construction became the "translation" of the various level descriptors into items dealing with real life situations. The items were tried in a few classes where the students seemed to answer the description of a given level and, when successful, became part of the placement questionnaire.

The experimental instrument was a 60 item questionnaire, 36 of which dealt with listening and 24 with reading. Once again, the students were asked to give themselves a score between 1 and 5 and each score was accompanied by a short descriptor: 1= never; 2= seldom; 3= half the time; 4= often; 5= always. The items had the following format:

> When people speak foreign languages around me, I can tell those using French
> I understand questions in French about my name, my address, my phone number
> As long as the professor is willing to repeat once in a while, I can understand the instructions given in French in class
> I am sufficiently fluent in French to understand most of the popular expressions used by today's teenagers
>
> ---
>
> If the menu at the cafeteria is written only in French, I can order knowing what I will be eating
> In a 2-3 page text, I can find the details that I need to answer specific questions
> I can read an editorial in French and determine the areas of agreement and disagreement between the author's views and mine

This experimental version was tried out at the beginning of the May and of the July sessions. Items were then analysed in terms of their predictive value and a final version was prepared for the September 1984 registration where the Centre for Second Language Learning had to place upwards of 2,500 students in its various groups. It has since then also been used in the same form for the January 1985 registration.

Since the *Self-Assessment Questionnaire* was the only placement instrument used (as opposed to the other instances where a questionnaire was used together with the *Proficiency Test*), the results obtained have to be discussed in terms of the quality of placement the *Self-Assessment Questionnaire* provided. In order to be able to do this, data for each of the 1983-84 registrations (4 in all) was compiled in terms of number of changes that were taking place after the first placement by the *Proficiency Test,* a change being defined here as the shifting of a student from one group to another. It was then possible to compare these numbers with those that occurred following the first placement using the *Self-Assessment Questionnaire.* Table 5 shows a comparison of those figures:

Table 5

Percentage of Changes from Initial Placement: 1983/84 and 1984/85

	1983-84 Prof. Test	1984-85 Self-Assess.
May Session	15.6%	11.9%
July Session	15.1%	11.6%
Fall Session	16.3%	13.3%
Winter Session	15.8%	14.3%

A few words are now in order about those changes. In the system used at the Centre for Second Language Learning, students are first placed by a test of some sort and sent to a teacher according to the test

results. The teachers then do further testing to make sure that all of the students in the group have been correctly placed. When there have been mistakes, students are sent to a group at a different level. These are the changes being referred to here. It must be pointed out however that the number of changes recorded includes not only the students that were incorrectly placed but also all other causes of changes: students wanting to be in another group with a friend, changes because groups are never so homogeneous that one cannot find students that might not exactly belong, changes because there are too many students in the group according to the professor's "standards", etc. All these reasons tend to explain what might appear to be a high percentage of changes (although a 15% figure is certainly not unheard of in other institutions). But since the same situations would occur whatever the placement instrument used, it was felt that all changes could be put together, regardless of the causes, and that the above comparisons were thus legitimate.

One last remark about Table 5 concerns the Winter Session results. While there was an increase in the percentage of changes at the beginning of that particular session, these numbers can be explained by the fact that for the first time, because of budgetary cut-backs, all students could not be admitted. This produced situations where, in certain timetables, there were not enough students to put together an homogeneous group. Groups were nevertheless formed that had to be changed afterwards. There is no reason to believe that the *Self-Assessment Questionnaire* performed less well than on the other occasions.

The preliminary conclusion arrived at from all this was that

self-assessment would continue being used as the sole placement instrument at the Centre. There are many reasons for this. First and foremost is the fact that placement using this approach is at least as good as what was being achieved using the standardized *Proficiency Test*. Then, the fact that self-assessment does not create any security problem also enters into play. A self-assessment questionnaire can be taken home and filled out at the candidate's leisure. This eliminates the setting up of tight testing schedules since the student can walk in and out of the room as he becomes available. And while taking the *Proficiency Test* used to take over one hour and thirty minutes, answering the *Self-Assessment Questionnaire* takes approximately twenty minutes. Finally, in a student-centered approach, it makes a lot of sense to put the student squarely on the spot and ask him to say what his level of proficiency is and consequently what his needs might be. A language teacher who has in hand the self-assessment answers of a second language student has at his disposal a very useful document from which to build a truly student-centered program.

In its present form, and although it already marks a significant improvement over the previous situation, the *Self-Assessment Questionnaire* needs revisions in at least two areas. First, a formula must be found that will better tell students what is expected from them and why it is felt they can do it. Some students still object to the idea that the evaluation is not done by someone in authority, someone "who knows". And so, while they accept to answer the questionnaire, it remains to be seen whether they are giving it their best effort. It is therefore very important

that this problem be solved if results are to be improved.

The second area of needed improvement is that of the predictive quality of items for students at the "intermediate" level. All tests place poorly at that level, the main reason being that it is very difficult to give a workable definition of both the level and the required abilities the student should demonstrate. The scores these students get on placement tests are an aggregate from a variety of sources that differ from one student to the other. Self-assessment should provide means to better describe the "intermediate" level but, as in any other testing situation, items have to be built and tried out before the best ones become part of a finely tuned instrument.

Self-assessment is now being used as a placement test with good results in instances where the students would not gain by overevaluating or underevaluating their proficiency level. In such situations, self-assessment involves the student in the whole learning process and provides the teacher with much valuable information. Having said this and because of self-assessment's intrinsic value, this approach should not be summarily excluded from all the other decision making dimensions of evaluation. In many cases, one could benefit from its input by simply adding a short standardized control to it. This area does seem to present some interesting aspects for future research.

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